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Being and Nothingness with a Little Nausea

Jeff Neale

Introduction

In *Nausea*, Sartre introduces us to a man who finds himself on the road to discovering that he *exists*. Antoine Roquentin uncovers the undifferentiated base-ness of the world and must collapse into nausea, as we all do when freedom “strikes.” He is a man who witnesses people acting in their personal “soap operas” as though their meaning and value had come from the world, instead of from themselves (Sartre 1943, 129). Acting as such is living in bad faith and hides the true quality of being—inert substance. If values arise *from* the world, then the world exercises or imposes its will on us like a god. Assuming this were so, then there could be no reason for internal conflict—Nausea—because the world would be the source of my freedom. Most of the world survives in just this way by living, “. . . in the spirit of seriousness which apprehends values starting from the world, and which rests in the reassuring, substantiation of values as things” (Sartre 143, 129). If objects in the world had meaning and value then they would not be undifferentiated inert material as Sartre believes. So, for example, stop signs would actually have the power to inhibit one’s foot from jamming on the accelerator when approaching the intersection. Clearly, the commanding power of road signs here intimated is false. Our goal is to discover that beneath the “mediating activity of consciousness” is the undifferentiated cold, slimy, sticky material stuff of the world to which the mind imparts value—in order to hide its “sliminess.”

The World Exists

The first part of our discussion should begin with Sartre’s view that objects are *in* space and that *consciousness is consciousness of something*. We have often asserted that “the can is on the table,” or “the tree is over there,” or “the grass is twenty-two inches from the man.” We can make these assertions because objects exist *in* space and not *in* consciousness.

All consciousness is consciousness of a transcending object. “The existence of the table in fact is a center of opacity for consciousness; it would require an infinite process to inventory the total contents of a thing” (Sartre 1943, 101). An object transcends our knowledge because it would take this infinite inventory to behold it. For example, the table has sharp corners, it has a smooth surface, is light grey, etc. If the table existed *in* consciousness then it would overwhelm consciousness

and become that center of opacity. Consciousness must remain “contentless.” If consciousness is consciousness of itself then consciousness becomes an object or center of opacity of itself. This is simply incomprehensible.

The whole point is to establish that objects exist *in* space and that being-in-itself exists separately from the mediating for-itself—consciousness. This is central to Roquentin’s revelation, “So this is Nausea: this blinding evidence? I have scratched my head over it! I’ve written about it. Now I know: I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists” (Sartre 1938, 122).

Anguish

Freedom can be a terrifying reality. Although we are always in freedom, we seldom look at our freedom as an infinite number of possibilities looming before us. Most of our actions are a denial of this dizzying freedom in the face of possibility. If our possibilities loom before us and we are free to choose and to actualize any of them, we are faced with two events. The first is that we are forced to reconstitute ourselves at every moment. “Thus the self which I am depends on the self which I am not yet to the exact extent that the self which I am not yet does not depend on the self which I am” (Sartre 1943, 120). Each moment we are forced to decide the person we are going to be because it is a nothing which separates ourselves from what we “think” we are.

The second implication of living in the face of all the possible possibles, is anguish—*anxiety*: “. . . it is in anguish that man becomes the consciousness of his freedom, or if you prefer, anguish is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being” (Sartre 1943, 116). Anguish arises when we are faced with the dilemma of reconstituting ourselves because we are separated from who we are by nothingness, instead of a thing. Sartre describes this anguish: “Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over” (*Being and Nothingness*, 116). This vertigo expresses the anxiety the for-itself experiences in being a groundless ground for itself, where it must constantly reconstitute itself.

Out of Anguish

Although our state of being is anguish or undesirable incertitude, it is apparent that we do not always reside in this state. We find ways to escape the haunting realization that every moment is a recreation of a phantom self. Action takes the individual out of anguish by not allowing reflection upon the act; allowing no questioning as to the acts necessity or meaning, as if the instruments were intimately connected to consciousness. In essence, we have tricked consciousness into believing that meaning is imparted by the world, by not allowing reflection upon our actions. This flight from anguish is lived as *bad faith*, where the pure inertness of the material world is “overlooked.”

World as Pure Facticity—Inert Substance

The for-itself—consciousness—comes into the world as a lack. “In its coming into existence human reality grasps itself as an incomplete being” (Sartre 1943, 170). The feeling of lack arises from its alienation from being—even from its own body. This being is a step-child which the for-itself adopts and tries in vain to gain its acceptance. Unfortunately, the gulf between being and nothingness is so vast that the two will never enter into the loving relationship that nothingness *desires*:

Thus this perpetually absent being which haunts the for-itself is itself fixed in the in-itself [being]. It is the impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself; it would be its own foundation not as nothingness but as being and would preserve within it the necessary translucency of consciousness along with the coincidence with itself of being-in-itself. It would preserve in it that turning back upon the self which conditions every necessity and every foundation. But this return to the self would be without distance; it would not be presence to itself, but identity with itself. (Sartre 1943, 171)

The for-itself is looking for a perfect synthesis with being. Consciousness wants to ground itself in being and when it turns back upon itself to reflect upon itself, it shall not discover the gulf of distance—a return to the self without distance. By becoming this synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself—GOD—the alienation from being would disappear and Antoine would not feel, as it were, *In the way* (Sartre 1938, 128). This is impossible or as incomprehensible as Jesus, who is both one hundred percent Man and one hundred percent God.

I think that where Nausea strikes is when we come to the realization that everything is just undifferentiated stuff beneath the identification system that the for-itself has placed on it:

Furthermore, there exist concretely alarm clocks, signs, tax forms, policemen—so many guardrails against anguish. But as soon as the undertaking is held at a distance from me, as soon as I am referred to myself because I must await myself in the future, then I discover myself suddenly as the one who gives its meaning to the alarm clock, the one who by a sign forbids himself to walk on a flower bed or on the lawn, the one from whom the boss’s order borrows its urgency, the one who decides the interest of the book which he is writing, the one finally who makes the values exist in order to determine his action by requirements. (Sartre 1943, 128-9)

Here is where nausea should arrive. At every moment the for-itself, to preserve a thread of consistency in its being, must reformulate its meanings and actions from itself. Then, it realizes that everything outside—being—even its own being, is some sort of cold, inert thing, that is not the source of requiredness or value.

Why Nausea?

Nausea is a feeling that is awful. It grips the stomach and the throat. At any moment the body could decide to purge away its ailment, but in Nausea one never knows when and if the body will just expel its pain. Nothing can remove the dizziness of the stomach; it stays and will not move. It cannot be reasoned with and while I feel nauseated I cannot move or hold a conversation without being irritable. I feel alone with my sickness, a sickness I am sure that no one else could fathom. Nausea is not just caused by bad food. It can come from fear, a sickening sight, a sudden movement, or a thought. It is through a series of realizations that Nausea arrives:

I emerge alone and in anguish, confronting the unique and original project which constitutes my being; all the barriers, all the guardrails collapse, nihilated [obliterated] by the consciousness of my freedom. I do not have nor can I have recourse to any value against the fact that it is I who sustain values in being. Nothing can ensure me against myself, cut off from the world and from my essence by this nothingness which *I am*. (Sartre 1943, 129)

Although we are thrust into the world, and for an indeterminate period are unaware of our freedom, when we do come into contact with ourselves, the dizziness arrives. “Nothing can insure me against myself. . .”; I become aware that nothing will stop me from throwing myself over the cliff. *All the guardrails collapsing* refers to the fact that what the world finds significant, policemen, signs, etc., are all just limitations created in my head. This can either make me dangerous or inert—more likely—and afraid of my own freedom and scornful of the world with its façade of importance. But mostly, I become nauseated!

Summary

Before examining *Nausea*, I wanted to establish the grounds for its possibility. First, it is important that we realize that consciousness is consciousness of something. Therefore, objects exist *in* space. Next, it is important to show that we are free. Because we can nihilate being and ourselves, we know that we are free. Every moment is a reconstitution of the self that we are, through the nothing separating us from the past and from the future. Realizing freedom is essential and at the same time becomes anguish. Anguish is followed by flight and bad faith. Of course, if we reflect upon our being, anguish may arise again and lead to further experiences like Nausea or a perception that all being is sticky slime.

Nausea

Antoine Roquentin is a non-fiction historian who lives alone after separating from his girlfriend, Anny. In this time he has certainly degenerated from the stan-

dards of society. Being alone has caused him to become sort of a misanthrope. He is no longer *in situation* and not being so has allowed him to reflect on the actions of others. Although lonely, he stands back in his solitude and begins to break down the society about him. "All these creatures spend their time explaining, realizing happily that they agree with each other. In Heaven's name, why is it so important to think the same things all together" (Sartre 1938, 8). Roquentin sees that society is caught up with the speedy movement of living and they have not yet felt the Nausea. "People who live in society have learned how to see themselves in mirrors as they appear to their friends" (Sartre 1938, 18). He is saying that people see each other as all the meanings that they feel someone's being imparts, rather than their being as pure being-in-itself.

Roquentin's grandmother had said that if one were to stare long enough in the mirror they would see a monkey and Roquentin comments, "I must have looked at myself even longer than that: what I see is well below the monkey, on the fringe of the vegetable world, at the level of jellyfish" (Sartre 1938, 17). Here are the origins of his Nausea, in seeing that things are just undifferentiated facticity.

What is necessary for Nausea to arrive in the individual is that he must see that his freedom *from* objects is present at every turn. What the smoothly functioning world believes is that their sense of value is derived from the objects about them rather than them imparting their value on objects. "I am beginning to believe that nothing can ever be proven. These are honest hypotheses which take the facts into account: but I sense so definitely that they come from me, and that they are simply a way of unifying my own knowledge" (Sartre 1938, 13). Here, Roquentin is writing on a historical figure, M. de Rollebon. He discovers that in his historical writings he is creating the character of Rollebon regardless of the accounts given in the historical texts. Because the objects have not the slightest value imparting ability, all the value comes from Roquentin. The dilemma lies in the fact that Roquentin feels that he is a historian who is writing a piece of his imagination, rather than a writer of a true historical account. But what is most certainly the outcome is that all history is a piece of fiction, because it is left to the for-itself—consciousness—to determine the meaning in the present.

It is apparent in *Nausea* that Roquentin finds that the Nausea arrives from a realization that all things which have names and meanings are just plain stuff. But before we examine this, it is important to show the effects of time on the for-itself. "Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition" (Sartre 1938, 39). What the author is coming to realize is that significance is not concrete. Events happen in the mind and are reproduced in the mind. While we live there are no significant events, nor mental stop signs that suggest when one significant event begins or ends.

The characters in *Nausea*: (The Self-Taught Man, Anny and Antoine), all talk about having adventures. The significance of adventures is that they are recalled and lived in bad faith. When the adventures are unfolding they have no meaning as adventures—until retold or retold as they unfold—but the past is relived in bad faith as though there were a concrete beginning and end to events:

for the most banal even to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. . . a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others. . . and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story (Sartre 1938, 39)

In recounting an event it becomes ordered and relived as though there were significance given to the past, as if the adventure were a tangible item. This is what the for-itself desperately cries out to—a tangible substance to ground itself in. “I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered” (Sartre 1938, 40). Telling of the past as though it existed is to deny that the past is separated from the present by a nothing. It comes as a shock to realize that a life lived as though it were a story is simply foolery. To think that way would be to insist, wrongly, that significance comes from the event.

Anny, Antoine Roquentin’s ex-lover, discovers the Nausea by this manner. She discovers that there is nothing but the nothingness of consciousness that brings out the event that she would have liked to have meaning. She calls these events “privileged situations.” “First you had to be plunged into something exceptional and feel as though you were putting it in order. If all those conditions had been realized, the moment would have been perfect” (Sartre 1938, 148). These are privileged situations which would lead to the perfect moment, but they must be ordered and given significance in the mind. This is the same dilemma that Antoine ran into in putting together his life as if it were an adventure. His escapades around the world were lived as an adventure and suddenly lost their appeal as he stared at the inert statue (Sartre 1938, 5). The inert statue, sitting as though it imparted meaning, had taken on its complete inert quality, and thrust Antoine from his life lived in bad faith—that of being able to arrange the world about himself.

When Antoine breaks from bad faith he discovers anguish and the facticity—pure, inert substance—of the world. By giving up writing about M. de Rollebon, Roquentin finds himself in anguish. But what is most striking is that in anguish and Nausea, he is the closest to living “authentically”:

M. de Rollebon was my partner; he needed me in order to exist and I needed him so as not to feel my existence. . . I was only a means of making him live, he was my reason for living, he had delivered me from myself (Sartre 1938, 98)

Antoine does not want to feel his existence because it would be to face the fact that consciousness is completely alienated from being. Here he finds that by being *in situation* with writing, he was able to avoid anguish. By throwing himself into his project he avoided the possibility of possibility. "Antoine was only a writer" and Rollebon was able to deliver Antoine from himself—from the nothingness of himself. While writing about Rollebon, as though he existed, Antoine had removed himself from feeling his own existence, that is, his own facticity. "The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. . . . And suddenly, noiselessly, M. de Rollebon had returned to his nothingness" (Sartre 1938, 96). It is the for-itself which creates meaning—alone, the groundless ground which breathes life into the past.

The Heart of Nausea

Being-in-a-world is the heart of Nausea. The following reflects the conflict of being a nothingness among being: ". . . here we sit, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing" (Sartre 1938, 112). Here, Antoine is speaking with The Self-Taught Man, an individual who lives in complete bad faith. At most, The Self-Taught Man is a simple clerk who thinks he is an academic but is at heart, a pedophile and a humanist (curious, no?). It is in conversing with The Self-Taught Man that Roquentin should be hit with the Nausea—as he is. In dealing with this man, who finds meaning in all the petty and putrid things that people do, Antoine is faced with bearing beneath the full weight of his sickness—the façade of living. The Self-Taught Man, who believes in all the things that people do—as meaningful—Antoine finds are things that people do so as not to feel their existence, "Each one of them has his little personal difficulty which keeps him from noticing that he exists" (Sartre 1938, 111).

Existence is the frightful demon for Roquentin:

My thought is *me*: that's why I can't stop. I exist because I think . . . and I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment—it's frightful—if I exist, it is because I am horrified at existing. *I am the one* who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: the hatred, the disgust of existing, there are as many ways to make myself exist, to thrust myself into existence. (Sartre 1938, 99-100)

Here, Antoine is faced with himself as being. He cannot get out of the world. His desire is to know nothingness but he would have to be in the world in order to know nothingness. This is the self-pity for being in a world—he cannot get away from himself. By hating and being disgusted with existence he is finding a way to exist. It appears like a circle. Every thing that he may try to accomplish in order to deal with his hatred of existing is still a form of existing. This is where the Nausea should explode onto him.

Frequently Antoine must tell himself the names of objects around him just so he can run from the Nausea. If things have names and values in themselves, then the Nausea has no way of striking, but when it does, the realization hits:

I am in the midst of things, nameless. Alone, without words, defenseless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves: they are there (Sartre 1938, 127).

All the stuff about him is just nameless being and, "... everything looks so much alike that you wonder how people got the idea of inventing names, to make distinctions" (Sartre 1938, 150).

The world is designed so that Nausea will not strike. Living in bad faith is the key to being physically healthy as opposed to Nausea. We set up our world to avoid the sickness from pure facticity. People convince themselves that the meanings of the world are set in stone and are stone:

They aren't afraid, they feel at home. All they have ever seen is trained water running from taps, light which fills bulbs when you turn on the switch, half breed bastard trees held up with crutches . . . They have proof, a hundred times a day, that everything happens mechanically, that the world obeys fixed, unchangeable laws. (Sartre 1938, 158)

It is this tendency in men to deny that there could ever be another way about the world. In class we discussed how science tells us that there is only one way to think about something, but we forget that we have the freedom to spurn the bad evidence for a given result. We speak of civil freedoms as being so precious but we deny ourselves the truth of existence. This is more primal than blacks and whites being able to drink from the same fountain; this is about drinking out of a fountain!

All activity is a creation of more existence and more meanings *away* from anguish. What happens when anguish strikes? "Nothing more than that: but for the little instant it lasts, there will be hundreds of suicides. Yes!" (Sartre 1938, 159). I am especially fond of this line because it seems like the only alternative for all those people whose concrete principles are revealed as being upside-down. It is not the world which imparts meaning but the for-itself which imparts meaning to the world. "Then what good would their dykes, bulwarks, power houses, furnaces and pile drivers be to them?" (Sartre 1938, 158). Where is there one can hide when one realizes the red rag blowing down the street is, "... a side of rotten meat, grimy with dust, dragging itself along by crawling, skipping, a piece of writhing flesh rolling in the gutter, spasmodically shooting out spurts of blood." (Sartre 1938, 159). The Nausea is us. We may flee from it through music or sex but it always returns to its home. It is a sweetish sickness realized through being. It is not just the absurd but it is knowing that you—exist.

Conclusion

I have been reluctant to use the word *Authentic*. Really, it seems like a term that is no longer applicable. Am I being *Authentic* or *Inauthentic*? I don't know, but I feel as though realizing that the world is just dead substance, I come closer to this ambiguous word—*Authentic*, or closer to truth anyway. I think that we know that we are closer to an authentic existence when we are nauseated by it. The desire of the for-itself is to be grounded. Its whole life is spent in self-deception and trickery. It should be nauseated by itself. Sartre says that the Nausea comes from the object into his hand. What does that mean except the for-itself bombarded by its antagonistic existence—alone, without solace, without hope of *connection* to its being, like a bad lover.

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